

The Truth of the Cinematograph: The Metamorphic Architecture Between Literature and Cinema

Interview With Fernando Guerreiro

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*Lecturing in Cinema at the Faculty of Letters, University of Lisbon,
I would like to ask how you think this discipline raises students' awareness
of the link between cinema and literature, especially in terms of
adaption?*

*Independent of recent developments in the conceptualization of
adaptation, do you feel that there is still a tendency to undermine
cinema, when the relationship between Literature and Cinema is
reviewed. Is cinema seen as subordinate to literature, rather than a
reinvention of the literary object? Also one tends to compare films or
versions of various adaptations, something that doesn't happen with
literary works.*

Is there even a relation, supposedly “original”, between Cinema and Literature? Basically, we question the (false) “obviousness” of 2 or 3 (fairly “established”) beliefs regarding this subject. First, that there is a *isomorphism* (parallelism) relationship between Cinema and Literature; an allegation that, on the one hand, attempts to homogenise cinema based on an idea of literature, and on the other hand, tends to legitimate the assumption (also valid for “literature”) that cinema is congenitally, or fatally, *narrative*.

Nothing stipulates that this “has” to be the case. In his *Notas sobre o Cinematógrafo*, placing himself within a context that has existed since the 1920s Modernists, Robert Bresson repeated that “the truth of the cinematograph cannot be the truth of the theatre, nor the truth of romance, nor the truth of painting” — and Élie Faure, in a text that dates back to

the early 1930s (“Introdução à Mística do Cinema”) specifies: “only by the subordination of narrative, dialogue, soliloquy to image and not the other way around, shall cinema find itself and its suggestive power once again.”

The second (widespread) belief is that cinema is mainly *visual* and not *mental*, as literature can be. From Jean Epstein to Eisenstein, Hitchcock or David Lynch (not forgetting Gilles Deleuze and Jean Louis Schefer), Cinema can also be regarded (and exercised) as a *mental process* developing from heterogeneous stimuli, composites of sensations-images and images-sensations that are also concepts. For Epstein (*Bonjours Cinéma*, 1921), cinema not only “registered” (recorded) but also “produced thought”, even where this might not have existed. Faure also writes that from the dual standpoint of “forms” and their “perception”, cinema may be described, in its conduct and effects (have you seen, for instance, Christopher Nolan’s *Inception*?), as a *metamorphic architecture*, both mobile and imaginary, resulting from the fluxional and sinusoidal dance of forms (and matters) in time (“formal drama launched in time” (34). Faure had already elaborated on this subject, writing in “Da Cineplástica”, 1922), “an architecture in movement that must remain in constant agreement, continuously balancing the relationship with the environment and the landscapes where it rises and dives” (27). And these ideas led to Loie Fuller’s so-called “serpentine dance”, at the beginning of the 20th century, to Godard’s “video-shape” (consider *Puissance de la parole*, 1986).

That way, perhaps it is better to speak of a *unique poetic principle*, objectifyable in various matters, shapes and bodies, a constantly composite and impure principle, monstrous and unfinished, made out of the unnecessary or desirably resolved mixture of matters (shapes/forms), themselves irreconcilable. “In every art, there is a diabolical principle that acts against and tries to destroy it,” says Bresson in one of his aphorisms to conclude: “Such a principle may not be totally unfavourable to the cinematographer” (37).

Therefore, this subject (cinema) should not be subdued to the narrow framework of “adaptation”. One may apply to literature (to any “art”) what Bresson states about theatre: “There can be no sponsals between theatre and cinematographer, without the extermination of both” (20).

As a result, even when it seems to be following the example (program) of other arts, cinema *changes* them, *transforms* them, is ungrateful and unfaithful to them, sometimes producing surprising effects or even revealing repressed or unforeseen elements. In other instances, it employs techniques and processes that are seemingly external to it, to search, wonder and excite itself, to attack or to discover itself. Also, in other instances, it handles the blow of opposition/difference between systems of form, *constantly (re)definining itself* according to the difference thus introduced (Manoel de Oliveira offers a good example of this). Or, in other cases, it strives to reproduce, from within itself, in this field, the effects and transformations brought about by other practices of forms (Godard or Lynch's "video-cinema", for instance).

Still today, Cinema may be treated as a bastard art (which, like Heathcliff, has no problem biting the hand that feeds it), impure and immature, proud and domineering in the way it incorporates new functions — now with 3D — organs and prostheses).

In the early 1920s, in an article about Charlot, Élie Faure, placed the question interestingly. For Faure, cinema was "a new art, inorganic still", and he stressed: "A new art creates its own organs. The only way we can help is by pulling it out of the chaos" (39). In the dialogues of *Le Gai Savoir* (1969), Godard verbalised the issue in a more enigmatic way: "What is cinema? Nothing. What does it want? Everything. What is it capable of? Something."

Thus, approaching this subject as a "teacher" is always an exercise endowed with a certain paradoxicality which we must handle (as best as we can).

"Sensitising" — in the etymological sense of the term *aesthetics* (in Greek), which connects it to the role of sensations and senses — yes, but less to the "relations" between Cinema and Literature (or "adaptation") and more to its *differences, specificities*; using one formal system against the other in order to maintain that "open" space (*écart*), prolific between the "arts" that Diderot defended so fervently.

In your opinion, is the structure of the National Cinema Plan suitable to educate the new generations for both visual culture and inter-disciplinarity?

Why do you think Portuguese cinema has begun to flourish recently? Did it meet the critics, or have the critics seen creative potential in our country?

I don't know if there is (or if there should be) something we can call "Portuguese cinema" (especially in our case, where there is no "tradition" or "schools", only "families", at best). Maybe it is better to talk about films made in Portugal, in a specific geographical space (in an atmosphere with specific features) and in the context of a community that is, fortunately, heterogeneous and disperse, which lives and works in this time-space (though records do not have to be, necessarily, chronological and homogeneous). A cinema made by "national filmmakers" (?), and not only. And for other reasons — related to imagination, cultural issues or sensibilities — not necessarily made here. Is Aki Kaurismäki a Portuguese film-maker, Pedro Costa a Japanese film-maker? Disregarding production issues — which are important — does that title (in spite of João Botelho or João Mário Grilo's well-structured arguments in its favour), aesthetically speaking, make sense to you? Why are some of those films well received in other countries? Perhaps because, primarily, in those countries, they were seen as cinema, films?

As to the existence of a National Cinema Plan, let's hope this plan, or another, really be applied.